

# How to Prevent Viewing Objectionable Television Programs

## FCC Consumer Facts

### Background

The cable television industry invests significant resources to protect its programs from theft and unauthorized reception. Typically, cable television companies encrypt or scramble the signal of channels that the subscriber has not purchased so that only persons who have paid for the service will be able to receive and view it. Some scrambling techniques employed by cable operators, however, may not always fully block the audio and video of each channel. The result may be "signal bleed."

### What is "Signal Bleed?"

Signal bleed is the ability of a cable subscriber to access the audio and/or the video of a channel that the subscriber has not purchased. For example, if a subscriber has not purchased a certain cable station, but is able to see or hear the programming on that station for brief periods, there is signal bleed. Signal bleed may result in an individual cable subscriber viewing programming that contains objectionable content or material. To address this specific concern, Congress enacted Section 504 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996.

### How Does Section 504 Address a Signal Bleed Problem?

Section 504 requires that, upon the request of the subscriber, a cable company must fully scramble or block the audio and the video of a programming service that a consumer does not subscribe to at no charge to the subscriber. This law applies to any type of programming that you do not wish to view and to which you do not subscribe. For example, the programming must be on a channel that is *not included* in the programming package that you purchased from your cable company.

Section 504 does not require the cable operator to fully block the channel unless the subscriber requests blocking. To take advantage of Section 504, contact your cable company and request that the channel you do not wish to view be blocked.

### Other Mechanisms Available to Block Programming or Channels

Generally, cable television operators have the right to determine the channels that are available on their cable systems. To maximize the number of subscribers, the cable operator selects channels that are likely to appeal to a broad spectrum of viewers. Because of this practice, a cable subscriber may receive programs as part of a programming package that he or she does not wish to view. While Section 504 does not require a cable operator to block services provided as part of a package you have subscribed to, individual subscribers have various tools available that may be used to prevent the viewing of programs or channels. For example, the subscriber may employ a lockbox and/or the V-chip.

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- **Lockbox**

A "lockbox" is a device that a subscriber may lease or purchase from the cable company or from a retail store. By using a lockbox, a cable subscriber can literally lock specific channels so that the programming cannot be viewed.

- **V-chip**

Federal law now requires that most programming available on television be rated to alert viewers if the program contains violence, inappropriate language, or other material that a viewer may find offensive. A V-chip is the circuitry in a television that is capable of identifying these ratings and blocking the programming that an individual finds inappropriate. All 13-inch or larger screen televisions that are manufactured or imported for use in the United States are now required by law to be equipped with the V-chip. Television manufacturers were required to include the V-chip on at least 50% of their products after July 1, 1999, and on the remaining 50% of 13-inch or larger products by January 1, 2000. If you have an older model television, you may purchase a V-chip and attach it to the television. Depending on the V-chip's technical specifications, the V-chip may be used to block individual programs or it may be used to block one or more channels entirely.

### Where to Go for Additional Information and Assistance

For more information on Section 504 and other issues, you may contact the FCC toll-free at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY. You may also obtain information on numerous telecommunications-related topics of interest to consumers at [www.fcc.gov/cgb](http://www.fcc.gov/cgb).

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